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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that oral language development is directly related to literacy, and is crucial for success in learning to be literate. This topical bibliography and commentary discusses language acquisition theories, components of language, phonology in literacy, and a first-grade classroom study that explored "literate talk" in the classroom context. It concludes that in the activities literate talk was involved in, the class was enhancing their social skills as well as developing their ability to understand written language. (Contains 3 Internet addresses and 16 references.) (RS)

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Oral Language Development as a Precursor to Literacy

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Darra M. Ellis, Copy Editor

Introduction

A child's oral communicative ability is vital to the development of their literacy skills and has been directly linked to their literacy development (Dickinson, 1987; Torrence & Olson, 1984). Though it seems intuitive that a child should first learn to express their thoughts and desires orally before they attempt to become literate, teachers are often reluctant to allot class time for children to talk to one another (Galda, Pelligrini, Shockley, 1995). Recently, some teachers have worked to incorporate inter-student talk time into their regimen. This allows children to freely communicate their ideas on a given reading assignment as well as develop a more complete understanding of the text. The functionality of oral language is vast, and recent research suggests that the individual sounds produced when speaking, called phonemes, have a compelling influence on literacy development (Albert, 1995; Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghoub, & Shanahan, 2001).

Language Acquisition Theories

Oral language tends to follow a pattern of development that later leads to literacy development, provided that the child has access to literature and is given proper guidance. According to Lindfors (1987):

- A continuous, dynamic evolving process
- A meaning-focused process
- An interactive process
- An active process of creative construction

There is some disagreement as to the source of this development pattern among scholars. The leading theories on child language acquisition are currently Behaviorism, Nativism, and Social Interactionism.

The first of these theories, which involves both the Operant Conditioning and the Classical Conditioning approach to learning, is the Behaviorist language acquisition model. Operant and Classical Conditioning entail a "Stimulus-Response" approach to learning. What this means is in Operant Conditioning terms is that the child produces a stimulus and receives a response from the parents or the environment that is either pleasurable or less likely to cause the child to repeat this action. In the Classical sense, children are presented with a stimulus, perhaps an object, and it is paired with an audible word that is simultaneously presented with. In a nutshell, this theory suggests that children learn by imitating their parents and being rewarded for each successful imitation. A problem with this approach is that children create new sentences and combinations of words that they have not heard in their environment.

At the opposite end of the linguistic spectrum, there is a school of thought called Nativism. Collectively they agree that humans have what they call a language acquiring device or LAD (Christie, 1997). This outlook suggests that children are hard wired for language in the sense that they have mechanisms within their brain that allow them to understand language and break down the rules that govern it (Chomsky, 1969). According to this model, children will learn language without the efforts of their parents and the environment aimed at achieving this feat.

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The final theory of substance is Social Interactionism. According to this outlook, the learning child takes an active and meaningful approach to learning language. Every linguistic interaction the child shares with caregivers is intentional and meaningful (Chirstie, 1997). Behaviorist theories of language acquisition focus on the nurture of parents while Nativists center on LAD. Social Interactionism acknowledges both areas of concentration in its method of study, and suggests a greater importance of the child's active role in language acquisition (Christie, 1997).

Components of Language

The structure of language is somewhat complex, but plays a large role in influencing literacy. Language consists of: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Phonology is a sound system that was designed by linguists to help them describe the sounds of oral language. The smallest distinctive sounds in language are called phonemes. These phonemes are categorized by separating vowels and consonants. The powerful influence of phonology on literacy will be discussed later.

Morphology is the study of the smallest meaningful units in language. Morphemes are made up of several phonemes. There are several different types of morphemes which function differently in language. The first is a lexical morpheme. Lexical morphemes are very small words that carry meaning. Words like *cat*, *bat*, *baby*, *key* and *see* are all lexical morphemes. Bound morphemes are small meaningful combinations of phonemes that carry meaning, but must be attached to a word. These are units like *re*, *un*, *anti*, and *pro*. Compound morphemes are two lexical morphemes that are combined to make a word that is meaningful such as *hairbrush*, *toothpaste* or *haircut*. Idioms are expressions that have no literal meaning but must be learned by explanation or context. Idioms are phrases like "put your foot in your mouth" which mean something much different than meaning of the literal combination of the words.

Syntax is the combination of morphemes to make a sentence or thought. There are two types of morpheme orders in syntax. These structures are linear and hierarchical. Linear structure refers to the object/verb arrangement in a sentence. An example of this can be seen in the sentence "the building fell on the man" and "the man fell on the building." The arrangement of the object and verb often changes the sentence. Hierarchical structure refers to the language specific way that the words in a sentence are grouped. For example, in some languages the adjective in a sentence follows the word that it describes rather than coming before it. Semantics is the study of how language can change the meaning of a sentence, depending on how the speaker chooses adjectives to and adverbs. Pragmatics concerns the revealing of a person's intentions in a realistic situation. For example, in conversation people often use a phrase like "I love running," but they say it in such a way that their intonation and facial expression reveal that they actually dislike running.

Phonology in Literacy

Research suggests that phonics plays an important role in learning to read and in the act of reading (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). When children learn to read, they learn to associate the sounds or oral language with the written combination of letters that make a phoneme (Albert, 1994). When they have mastered all the individual phonemes, children have an ability to "sound out" any given letter combination. They eventually move from piecing individual phonemes together as they read a word, to eventually blending the letter combinations such as (*cra* in crackle). This progression in the steps of learning to read allows children to apply their knowledge of sounds from their previous experience in oral language. According to Albert (1995), phonics is action, process. As with learning any skill, it needs practice with feedback. Since phonics is always done out loud, there are immediate feedbacks when the learner reading aloud hears familiar speech (4).

A Classroom Study

In a first grade classroom Pellegrini, Shockley, Galda, and Stahl (1994) studied the contexts that children explored "literate talk" and documented the results. Literate talk was simply talk that focused on learning to read or write. They observed "oral sharing time, writing workshop, reading workshop, and whole class reading time." The teacher of this class was flexible and allowed children to exchange thoughts through oral communication. Galda explained that "the teacher was able to build an interclass community that enabled the children to work toward literacy in ways that each found useful and satisfying."

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The driving idea behind this approach to teaching literacy is the fact that when children are involved in activities and are then allowed to interact with one another, they are learning about the social, cognitive and linguistic processes that they and their classmates are using (Bernstein, 1960; Piaget, 1983; Halliday, 1978). Galda considers joint book reading and social fantasy play to be the especially important contexts for developing literacy (9). She suggests that "talking about thinking, knowing, reading, writing, words, letters, sounds, people and things that are not present in the immediate environment is considered a positive predictor of success in learning to read and write." According to Dyson (1988, 1989), while the children talk about these things, they encounter help in learning from one another be it intentional or not.

The first context literate talk was observed in was appropriately called Oral Sharing Time. This consisted of children individually presenting material from their home, previous stories they had written, or simply discussing stories that they had heard before. Galda observed children relating oral language to their writing, borrowing ideas from one another's language and its structure (10). These benefits were observed within the first week of oral sharing time.

The next context studied was Writing Workshop. In this setting, the class would work individually and in small groups on projects of their choice for 30-40 minutes daily. Galda reported a steady buzz of voices in the classroom and noted that the talk was rarely off task. Frequently the students would vocalize as they composed their papers. As they spelled out each word, they received help from their classmates on spelling. It was mentioned that the use of small tables promoted collaboration of the students.

The third activity that involved literate talk was Reading Workshop. Children were allowed to choose a book, read it and then discuss the story as they desired. They were granted permission to take the book to their most comfortable place in the room as they read it. The children read individually, in pairs, or in groups no larger than three. When a student would run into trouble reading a word, they often received help from a classmate.

The final context observed was Whole Class Reading, which was led by the teacher of the class. While the instructor was reading to the class, they were gathered around her, discussing the sounds of letters, words, placement, linearity, and illustration-text match (14). The instructor focused on oral interaction, which often led to dramatic reenactments of the stories told. According to Galda, these reenactments allowed children to relate textual language to oral language and developed their planning skills as well.

The study of literate talk occurrences suggested the "importance of a variety of opportunities for interactions with peers during literacy events and the influence of reading and responding to books at home" (10). This further supports the importance of integration of talk time into teachers' lesson plans. The study demonstrated that the more often the children were allowed to orally interact with a variety of peers, the greater their phonological awareness became. Also, the students' abilities in reading and writing skills improved according to a variety of formal measures (10).

Conclusion

When first learning to read, attention should be given to phonemic awareness so that children can blend phonemes by learning the act of reading rather than memorizing simple phoneme combinations (Albert, 1995).

Research suggests that oral language development is directly related to literacy, and is crucial for success in learning to be literate. Children who are allowed to develop their oral language skills in a variety of settings do better on formalized literacy tests (Galda, 1995). In the activities literate talk was involved in, the class was enhancing their social skills as well as developing their ability to understand written language.

Internet Resources

* Summary of a position statement of the International Reading Association:
Phonemic Awareness and the Teaching of Reading (July 1998)
With this statement the International Reading Association seeks to clarify issues of phonemic awareness, phonics, and the failure of schools to teach the basic skills of reading as they relate to research, policy, and practice.
http://www.reading.org/positions/phonemic.html

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* Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read
This report lists findings and determinations of the National Reading Panel by Topic Areas, such as phonemic awareness instruction and phonics instruction.
http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/findings.htm

* Enhancing Oral Language, Vocabulary, and Comprehension Development through Book Reading and Discussion
This article contains information about the importance of oral language development in emergent literacy instruction and sample activities for enhancing oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension development.
http://www.screading.org/CI/ETR_EL_main.html#enhanceoral

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